

# Confidence in Thoughts to Commercials: A Self-Validation Analysis

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Thoughts generated by the receivers of advertisements often determine both immediate and long-term acceptance of persuasive communications (e.g., Cacioppo & Petty, 1980; Wright, 1981; Petty & Cacioppo, 1983). Most prior studies of cognitive responses to advertisements have focused on the valence and the extent of thoughts. Valence refers to the favorableness or unfavorableness of the thoughts, and extent of thinking refers to the number of thoughts generated. In general, considerable prior research has shown that the more favorable thoughts people have to a message, the more favorable attitudes are, and the more unfavorable thoughts people have to a message, the less favorable attitudes are (Greenwald, 1968; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Ostrom & Brock, 1981; Wright, 1973).

In addition to examining thoughts for valence and number, other categorization schemes have been proposed as useful (e.g., coding for the origin of the thought, target, self-relevance, and so forth; see Cacioppo & Petty, 1981; Shavitt & Brock, 1986). One feature of thoughts that recently has been suggested as useful is people's confidence in their own thoughts. According to *self-validation theory* (Petty & Briñol, 2000), the relationship between thoughts and attitudes should be greater when people have confidence rather than doubt in their cognitive responses. In an initial series of studies on self-validation (see Petty, Briñol, & Tormala, 2002), we have shown that thought confidence is conceptually and empirically distinct from other components of beliefs such as the likelihood or desirability of the consequences the beliefs express (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1985). In the current research, using self-reported and manipulated thought confidence, we provide evidence that increasing confidence in thoughts can either increase or decrease favorability toward an advertisement depending on the valence of the thoughts elicited by the commercial.

In Experiment 1, fifty-six participants were exposed to an advertisement for a new car composed of relatively convincing arguments. Participants were asked to think carefully about the ad, to list their thoughts about it, and to rate the ad on a series of semantic differential attitude scales. Cognitive responses were coded by two judges as positive, negative or neutral toward the ad. Consistent with the strong arguments in the message, participants generated significantly more positive than negative thoughts.

The extent to which participants had confidence in the validity of their thoughts was measured after the thought-generation task with a series of 7-point semantic differential scales (e.g., certain/uncertain). Participants were classified as high or low in thought-confidence according to their self-reports. Participants who reported relatively greater confidence in their favorable thoughts held more favorable attitudes toward the ad ( $M=7.11$ ) than those who reported lower confidence in their favorable thoughts ( $M=6.19$ ),  $F(1,56)=3.71, p=.05$ .

In Experiment 2, we changed the product, the strength of the information in the commercial, and introduced a manipulation of thought confidence. Sixty-two participants were exposed to a relatively *weak* commercial introducing a new vacuum cleaner, and they were asked to think carefully about it, to list their thoughts toward it, and provide their attitudes toward the ad. Analysis of the thoughts revealed that participants generated significantly more negative than positive thoughts overall, consistent with a weak

message. Nevertheless, because a small minority of participants generated mostly favorable thoughts, participants were divided into two groups—those who generated mostly unfavorable thoughts (71.7 %) and those who generated more positive than negative thoughts (16.7 %). This division formed a variable called Thought-direction.

The other independent variable was formed by manipulating the extent to which participants had confidence in the validity of their own thoughts. This was accomplished by asking participants to recall and write down prior situations in which they felt confidence or doubt. Prior research has shown that this manipulation following a thought listing can lead people to misattribute the high or low feelings of confidence induced by the writing task to the thoughts listed previously about the persuasive message (Petty, Briñol, & Tormala, 2002). Thus, this induction followed the thought listing task but preceded the measures of attitude toward the commercial.

Results of a 2 (Thought direction: mostly negative or mostly positive) X 2 (Confidence: high or low) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of Thought-direction such that participants who generated mostly counterarguments held less favorable attitudes toward the ad than those who generated mostly favorable thoughts,  $F(1,56)=13.50, p=.001$ . Most interestingly, and as predicted by the self-validation hypothesis, a marginally significant interaction emerged between Thought-direction and confidence,  $F(1,56)=3.27, p=.07$ . The two-way interaction showed that participants who generated mostly counterarguments tended to report less favorable attitudes toward the ad with high ( $M=3.11$ ) rather than low ( $M=4.09$ ) confidence. But, for the positive-thoughts group, participants tended to report more favorable attitudes toward the ad under high ( $M=6.37$ ) rather than low ( $M=5.78$ ) confidence.

The present research shows that increasing people's confidence in their thoughts in response to an advertisement can increase or decrease the impact of the commercial depending on the dominant valence of the thoughts elicited by the ad. When thoughts were mostly favorable, increasing confidence rendered attitudes more favorable (Studies 1 and 2), but when thoughts were mostly unfavorable, increasing confidence rendered attitudes less favorable (Study 2). Thus, the current research suggests that researchers might find it useful to assess not only the number and valence of thoughts to commercials, as is common in existing work on cognitive responses, but also to assess the confidence people have in their thoughts. Just as measures of attitude confidence and other attitude strength indicators have helped improve our understanding of the link between attitudes and behavior (see Fazio & Zanna, 1978; Petty & Krosnick, 1995), measures of thought confidence might help to improve our understanding of the link between thoughts and attitudes.

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